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Coal Waste Pile Removal Project Receives National Award

- Streambed Buried for 60 Years Brought Back to Life -

An abandoned mine land reclamation project that removed tons of coal waste and restored a natural streambed buried under the waste for 60 years has received a national award from the Office of Surface Mining (OSM), the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy (DMME) announced today. DMME's reclamation efforts on the Cranes Nest Gob Pile Removal Project were recognized during the annual conference of the National Association of Abandoned Mine Land (AML) Programs. OSM Deputy Director Glenda Owen presented the 2010 AML Small Project Award to DMME.

"The reclamation accomplished on the Cranes Nest Gob Pile is an excellent on-the-ground application of a 1999 OSM initiative commonly referred to as AML enhancement," noted Jackie Davis, Director of DMME's Division of Mined Land Reclamation (DMLR). AML enhancement is a government financed construction project wherein the contractor can recover coal that is strictly incidental to the project, and use proceeds from the coal sale to offset the cost of the reclamation. "Using the enhancement rule, DMME completely removed the 8-acre gob pile, restored a thousand foot stream channel, and planted native hardwood seedlings on the site. We accomplished this work for a cost of \$3,600 and realized a cost savings to our program estimated at \$300,000," said Davis.

The project is located 2.9 miles north of Coeburn in Wise County, Virginia on an unnamed tributary of Toms Creek. Unregulated coal processing operations prior to August 3, 1977, resulted in the 8- acre gob pile that filled the entire valley floor, including the stream, with coal waste or gob. The project's goal was complete removal of the waste pile and planting of native hardwood seedlings. During the reclamation, DMME and the project contractor realized the existing stream flowed on top of 8 to 10 feet of coal waste, all of which was removed to restore a natural stream channel.

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“There are hundreds of gob piles throughout the coalfields of southwest Virginia,” stated Richard Davis, AML Projects Coordinator. “Gob piles adversely impact water quality and have the potential to combust. The best reclamation is complete removal, and that is what DMME achieved at Cranes Nest. GOBCO, LLC of Abingdon, Virginia was the project contractor and did excellent work on this project, taking a personal interest in ensuring its success.”

GOBCO began reclamation work to completely remove the gob pile in August 2007. The company developed plans and acquired a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers to remove the gob and restore the natural stream channel. GOBCO completed its work in September of 2008.

Community volunteers and a tree planting contractor completed final reclamation in March and April of 2009. Reclamation of the site was of such quality that the Office of Surface Mining chose the project as a tour stop for a 2009 technical interactive forum on stream restoration.

Begun in 1992, OSM’s Abandoned Mine Land Reclamation Awards showcase exemplary reclamation techniques. A panel of judges, composed of directors of state reclamation programs and OSM managers, vote to determine the winners. “These winners are to be commended for their remarkable success in eliminating the dangers these abandoned mine sites posed to the public and the environment,” OSM Director Joe Pizarchik said in an OSM news release.

The DMME is very proud of the reclamation achieved at the Cranes Nest Gob Pile Removal Project,” stated Davis. “Virginia’s national leadership in innovative AML reclamation practices is acknowledged through this award and a similar award presented to Virginia in 2008 by the Office of Surface Mining. With limited funding and the sunset of the AML program in the not too distant future, Virginia has committed to accomplish as much AML reclamation as possible using practices such as AML enhancement.”

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